

# A LONG INTERVIEW WITH RAYMOND HAMRICK IN 1983

by David G. Jensen

**BIOGRAPHY.** Raymond Cooper Hamrick was born 14 June 1915 in Macon, Georgia. After graduation from high school in 1933, in 1935 he was employed as a watchmaker with Andersen's Jewelers in Macon. Following service (1942-1945) in the Army Air Corps during World War II, in 1946 he returned to Andersen's as junior partner, and became sole proprietor after the death of Mr. Andersen in 1963.

Although a jeweler by profession, Mr. Hamrick's avocation was Early American hymnody, in particular *The Original Sacred Harp* (orig. ed. 1844). His first composition in that tradition was in 1969, and he wrote several documentary papers as well. In 1987, he was elected to the Board of Directors of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company in Bremen, Georgia, and as President in 1988, as which he served four terms.

Raymnd Hamrick was appointed to the Music Revision Committee for the 1991 edition of *The Original Sacred Harp*, which contains six compositions by him:

347 *Christian's Farewell*, 492 *Invocation*, 503 *Lloyd*, 540 *Nidrah*, 569T *Emmaus*, 571 *Penitence*.

A collection of Raymond's original works was published as *The Georgian Harmony*, first in 2010, and a much expanded edition in 2012.

Raymond C. Hamrick passed away on 24 November 2014 in Macon, Georgia. He had been married to Joyce Rape in 1959, from whom he was later divorced. Raymond was survived by their two daughters, three grandchildren and one great-granddaughter.

**INTERVIEW.** My first and only direct contact with the late Raymond C. Hamrick was in May of 1983. I was 28 years of age. Prompted by curiosity, and without much prior knowledge of *The Original Sacred Harp*, in the second week of that month I travelled from Portland, Oregon to Atlanta, Georgia in order to investigate the subject. I inquired of a librarian in downtown Atlanta, who referred me to Mr. Hamrick.

I contacted him by telephone, and we made an appointment to meet on Wednesday, May 10. I travelled to Macon, where I stayed for several days in a nearby motel. We met mid-day on Wednesday, and spent the afternoon at his home discussing *The Original Sacred Harp*, about which I had prepared some questions. It was an informal discussion, and I took some cursory notes. The following day, Thursday, we toured by automobile a nearby semi-rural area, where he told more of the history and character of the region. We had lunch at one link of a regional restaurant chain called Shoney's.

Raymond's answers were concise, not cryptic, and he was familiar and comfortable with the questions I asked. Some of his responses may appear to differ from current theory and practice. Without attempting to interpret, I will simply quote his remarks as precisely as memory allows, and with reference to the notes mentioned above. Memory does not appear to have revised any of his statements, as a certain amount of what he said was contrary to my preconceptions, and a few things remain unclear to me. A few [comments] will be added when pertinent.

The following is a summary of our discussion regarding *The Original Sacred Harp* and its tradition.

VERSION 1.0 OF THIS DOCUMENT



This work © 2023 by David G. Jensen under a Creative Commons Attribution, non-Commercial, Share-Alike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/> for details.

**HISTORY.** First, Raymond recounted a general history of Early American music, beginning with the Colonial Era. He related how that much of the church music of that time and region was accompanied by instruments, and he played several recordings. The album (vinyl LP) I remember is: *The New England Harmony: a Collection of Early American Choral Music* (Folkways FA 32377, 1964). In particular, I recall the rendition of William Billings' *Easter Anthem*. At the text quoted from Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742-45).

“Man, all immortal hail, hail, /Heaven, all lavish of strange gifts to man,”

Raymond remarked: “Those are the greatest lines in *Sacred Harp*.” [ This statement reflects the same conviction expressed in his later asserotion that his composition *Lloyd* (503, OSH 1991) was transcribed from the singing of angels which he had heard in a dream.]

**SHAPE NOTES.** The introduction of shape-note notation (Little & Smith, *The Easy Instructor* 1801) was already familiar, and so did not require much explanation. I remarked that some people seemed so familiar with certain pieces that they had memorized the solmization. He corrected me: that it was not memorization, but that experienced singers had acquired the skill well enough so as to solfège by ear, without visual recourse to the shapes. He noted that the latter remain an excellent teaching tool, then added that the four-note fasola scale makes this process easier, and that it is preferable in this regard to the seven-shape doremi solmization.

**FOLK MELODIES.** Throughout our conversation, Raymond portrayed the history of Early American hymnody as a continuum, without a radical discontinuity between the Colonial music of the Eighteenth Century and the incipient folk movement during the frontier Revival at the turn of the Nineteenth. Regarding the latter, he confirmed George Pullen Jackson's discovery that numerous folk tunes were borrowed at that time from the oral tradition, but maintained that many more original melodies were composed within that tradition.

I mentioned that among my primary interests was the archaic modality, and brought up several examples, including *Bourbon*, the original setting of which I transcribed from his copy of *Missouri Harmony* (orig. 1820). Raymond referred me to the work of the late Dorothy D. Horn (*Sing to Me of Heaven*, 1970), who he said had interviewed him, and who consulted various shape-note books from his collection. Making a note, I asked him to confirm the spelling of how I understood the name: “Hohen”. Raymond winced, and replied in a mildly sardonic manner, and with a nasal 'r': “I think you people pronounce it “Ho-r-n.”

Also regarding the spelling of names, I mentioned my difficulty in tracing certain forebears in the region. Raymond replied that German migrants often anglicized the spelling of their surnames; citing as an example that his own surname “Hamrick” was originally “Hammerich.”

I also mentioned that I was contemplating a modal analysis of the melodies, contingent on what books would be sufficient as a representative sample, or at least to be convincing. He suggested an analysis of successive editions of *The Original Sacred Harp*, as some people felt that it was succumbing to common-practice “gospel” influence, although he did not think so. [I have affirmed his opinion, with specific reference to the 1991 edition. 1971 was the edition current at that time.]

**INTERVALS SUNG OTHER THAN WRITTEN.** My interest in the subject was kindled by the raised sixth in *Wondrous Love*. The opinions I found tended to regard that as a survival from its source melody ('Captain Kidd' (18<sup>th</sup> Century). I suspected that its occurrence in this and other melodies was structurally induced.

Raymond did not think that the raised minor sixth was universal, although he could not cite an objective criterion to distinguish which minor melodies favor its use. His “ear”, however, was adept at identifying such melodies. We examined a series of tunes, each of which he hummed far enough to say whether its sixth was raised (“Dorianized”). He also thought that the Dorian tendency was at least in part historically derived, and was not

exclusively structural [the present author would aver both.] He added, though, that the harmonic context may or may not favor a raised sixth, even within the same piece. We briefly discussed its occurrence in parts other than the tenor, with reference to particular examples of which recorded instances are preserved..

Raymond also mentioned other intervals not sung as written. Among these he emphasized a tendency to neutralize the second in certain minor melodies. In more general terms, he mentioned that, although traditional singing often sounded out of tune, in fact it preserved an archaic tonality. With reference to Horn's work, he observed that the fourths and fifths were sung true, and that a fifth is best regarded as the inversion of a fourth.

He made some other, more general remarks about "dispersed" harmony, but did not expand on its quartal aspects. Neither did we discuss related issues, such as natural acoustics, equal temperament, etc.. My impression was that he regarded dispersed harmony as a valid and fully-developed system, worthy of respect, to say the least, his mastery of which was keenly intuitive as well as formal, and which he was inclined to protect. By that, I do not mean to imply that Raymond's outlook was in any wise esoteric; in fact the contrary.

Raymond contrasted the essays of some "old-timers" (my phrase) with certain academic efforts at analysis. His approach was at no time polemic, but patiently to insist that the subject be evaluated without (culpable) ignorance or prejudice. I remember calling attention to a certain harmonic incongruity, at which he responded, with a pointed look: "We rather like it that way. Don't you?"

There, too, his tone was never adversarial, although it was on occasion tinged with irony at the cultural distance between what he represented and what is commonly regarded as "correct" music. He was consistently forbearing, free of either consternation or any cloud of resignation. These characteristics did not seem so much cultivated, but rather the mirror of deep conviction acquired from dedication throughout his adult life to *The Original Sacred Harp* and the tradition of which it testifies.

**PITCH.** Raymond discussed the role of the pitch-er, and said that much or most of the time an entire piece is sung lower than written. The differences he mentioned ranged from a second to as much as a fourth. I do recall that he suggested a minor third as the general rule. He said that the reason for so many scores being set high was to fit the melody within the staff, to facilitate reading, and to conserve space by avoiding ledger lines. He also pointed out that the pitch accorded the key, among other tonal vagaries, was more easily varied in the days when organ accompaniment of congregational singing was an exception rather than the rule.

**PARTS.** To summarize: mostly three, sometimes four. The melody remains in the tenor, despite experiments, none recent and largely unsuccessful, to transpose the melody to the treble. Addition of an alto part to the three-part arrangements early in the Twentieth Century did not precipitate a crisis as is sometimes alleged, and did not critically alter the nature of the music. Raymond observed several instances where the alto part parallels the bass.

In agreement with George Pullen Jackson (1874-1953), he observed that the settings often are more polyphonic than chordal. He also showed me his autographed copy of one of Jackson's books, likely *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (1933). He mentioned that Jackson left his books and papers to UCLA rather than to Vanderbilt University, where he (Jackson) taught.

[The present author was already familiar with Jackson, who was acquainted with members of the author's family, also folklorists. Familiarity with Jackson's works and early exposure to the fasola tradition (having been raised in the Blue Ridge) were what motivated this author to explore the subject further.]

**TUNE TYPES** I do not recall that we discussed the various types of setting (plain tune, fugue, set piece, anthem, etc.) in much detail. What I remember of his explanation of fuging tunes is mainly descriptive. Reformation-Era metrical psalters were cited as among the sources for the shape-note books. There was a bit more attention to anthems, which I do not remember well, other than that the Colonial-Era composers often defied harmonic convention.

**RHYTHM** I opened the discussion by remarking that, in practice, the rhythm seemed almost exclusively duple. He affirmed the tendency, but cautioned against over-generalizing this characteristic, and thus oversimplifying the rhythm. Raymond's opinions on the matter may be illustrated best by his instructions on conducting. Following are the only time signatures that we discussed:

**SIMPLE TIME** Common Time (4 : 4) trace a square with the hand, and count 1 2 3 4 , and not merely down-up 1 2 / 1 2 . [I have observed Raymond count a square in certain surviving videos of him leading.] The square figure may be simplified in practice, but the principle remains the same. Cut Time (2 : 2) count the measures in twos. Raymond warned against singing too slowly (dragging) as well as against rushing the tempo. Triple Time (3 : 4) trace a triangle with the hand, and count in threes. The warning on 2 : 2 applies to 3 : 2 as well.

**COMPOUND TIME** Compound Duple (6 : 4) I asked whether there were occasions when this is counted as triple (3 x 2) rather than as duple (2 x 3). Raymond acknowledged the possibility, but did not think it occurred much. [A quick glance at various compositions with this time signature vouches for duple.] 6 : 8 is sometimes indicative of an actual jig tune, and is counted 2 x 3 . He brought up, and cited examples of, changes in time signature within certain longer pieces, mostly anthems, and we examined several of these.

**ACCENT** Raymond affirmed that the accent is on the downbeat, and that this stems from earlier European practice, but did not explain its history much further. He emphasized the possible influence of various dance traditions on accent. I do not recall a particular example other than the jig, mentioned above.

**TEMPO** Raymond observed, as Jackson had remarked, the culmination by the middle of the Twentieth Century of a general impulse to race the tempo. He said that there had been a movement since the mid-1960s to slow the tempo to moderate speed, and with greater attention to the text. He was wary of rubato, though, as well as of maudlin sentimentality. He did attest that the steady rhythm was attractive to the singers (more so than to listeners), perhaps because of syncopation with body rhythms such as pulse and respiration. I responded that the same is also said of early Christian Chant (plainsong).

Later, after we had concluded, Raymond contacted Hugh W. McGraw (1931-2017, then executive secretary of the Sacred Harp Publishing Co., composer and foremost promoter of *The Original Sacred Harp*). He, in turn, put me in contact with Ezra Bowen, who provided a ride on the Saturday (May 14) to my first Sacred Harp singing, at Mt. Olive Primitive Baptist Church in Cullman, Alabama. The dates recorded throughout this account are predicated on that same annual singing in Cullman having been scheduled then (1983) on the Saturday before the third Sunday in May, as it is at this writing (2016).

Not long after I had returned to Portland (Oregon), Mr. Hamrick sent me typewritten manuscripts of two articles he had written, one on pitch and the other on tempo. Both are now deposited in the Pitts Archive at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.